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# Rhoda Stertzer

Noel Weeks

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Interviewed by Noel Weeks
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Transcript

The Athabaskan tribe in Ontario, Alaska. Um it's not a rez, but it's just a little village. You can't get there by car, you can't fly by airplane. It's like 250 miles from Fairbanks.

I married- I met my husband when I was in 10th grade. We married. We lived in, at my home for 8 years and, um, the pipeline started. And we had the pipeline going all the way through Alaska from valleys all the way to Purdo Bay. And, um, BP came in, or it was, I can't remember what it was before that, but it was the major oil company. They hired their own folks from Texas or wherever and a lotta Alaskians lost out on jobs and we couldn't afford to pay the outrageous price that everything went from, you know, like 100% higher than norm because of the wage, the wage was like doubled so everything went along with that, so we couldn't make it in Alaska, so my husband's from Ohio, from Columbus Ohio and he had a- his family had a dry cleaners in upper Arlington so we moved out here so he could work and we've lived here since 1980.

Yeah, you had to join a union and you had to go into the village or go into the city and you had to stand in line, and like the airline, cause when I lived in Alaska there were no phones in my village or no tvs so there's no way to make contact with the companies that was hiring, so you had to be in the union you had to go into the city and stand in line for the next opening and, you know, they just made it very difficult for us to get a job.

No. We tried but they couldn't make it cause they didn't know you, it's way different, it's kind of like, like uh, you had to pay for hotel room you had to pay for food but when you're in the village you could just catch what you eat, like fish and wild game, so that's how we grew up.

It was 1983, I was here about 3 years and then finally found, um, my husbands work was up in upper Arlington and they had the northwestern newspaper. It was just a little like suburb they had throughout the city. They had an article in the newspaper saying at this church they were having this lady sing. So I was like, I went down there and sat way in the back and that's when I first met Selma Walker and Carol Walker and, well, it's Carol Welch now, but her name was Walker and they were singing, they were doing a performance for a small audience and when they were done it sounded so good cause I was really, I was- I went through culture shock the first few years of living out here cause I came from the woods, like right from. I lived 5 miles out of my village near a big lake in a little log cabin, no electricity, so, um, after they performed I went up and I introduced myself to Selma and Carol and that's when I started coming here when I went and saw them on high street.

It, um, brought us all together. Like I was isolated, I lived way out in the country so I didn't have anyone, nobody from my home and no Native Americans anywhere. They were the first one's I met, so it kind of brought me, gave me comfort in knowing I was not alone here. So it gave me, um, we had a lot of night visiting talking, lot of gatherings, lot of, introduced me to powwows. So we traveled to different powwows throughout and that's how I met more Natives from in Ohio.

I think that talking circles is a big issue because suicide is very high amongst the Native Americans, not just Native Americans but you know with the economy as it is right now you see a lot of people, like, committing war in the city. Even in this area, it's not a good safe area to be so its good to have a place for people to go to find peace and happiness and security and just to know there's a place they can go for that.

I like it when they have more gatherings, like at Christmas and thanksgiving, I'd like to have beading classes and quilt making and cooking classes, you know, that's good. Teaching beadwork would be another thing. I remember coming down here way in the after I started coming down here, we used to have meetings like that you know teaching beads and gathering you know, we'd get a good group, it was fun. We'd laugh and tell stories but that was 30 years ago or so. It would be good to see that come back.

Proud and very happy. I have children who are- their fathers are white and so they're half breeds or, so, however you want to call it, but, um, I try my best to teach them my way and I know some words in my language so I'm raising my grandbabies, well not raising them, but I babysit them while their parents work so I teach them native words from my language from my tribe so, um, they- cause when we were growing up Alaska just becoming a state they told my parents that you shouldn't teach them to speak your language cause they're going to have a broken English. So our parents, they just spoke English around us so we only learned English and, um, so I know a few words and we have a big dictionary in our language, so, but I was young, I was just at the right age where my parents still spoke some Native words so I knew some and I know the dialect, so I would teach my grandbabies some words and it was really cute because my grandson said "thank you" in my language and my son-in-law said "what does that mean?" cause he's from Akron and so my daughter had to tell him what it meant but my grandson already picking up some of the words, so, but that's what not just me spacing but a lot of my people my age or older, its just like maybe a 10 year gap in our life where our language was not spoke so we have this generation of not knowing, and then they started teaching it in school so the children now in Alaska learning the language but sometimes its hard to live in Columbus being kind of the only, not the only but, you know, there's just a few of us in Columbus that's Native. It's sad, I remember crying a lot when I first came here because I was so lost, and it was just the culture shock, just, you know, I couldn't eat my native food and it was just really hard but I'm really proud to be Native. I'm going to try my best to bring up my children like that. I don't think I'm the only one that's going through this change in

our life, I think it's just evolution, you know? Cause we were talking about- everyone's like "oh my god, the young people are so different anymore." But I don't think we could help it, it's just a change. It's just life, like for anybody in the world that goes through from comparing your life from now to the 18, early 1900s, there's a big change, yeah? So that's how the words happening to me. But I with my dictionary, it's like this big, it's called the koyukon athabaskan dictionary and it's got lots, it's just amazing. Its hard to read because we never learned to read our language so I have to play with these words and its nothing, it's not even close to English. Its like really like trying to learn a whole different language by reading it. but if I get to start saying it, it kind of just starts to roll out. That's what I would like to do, I would like to keep our language alive. I still do a lot of the cultural things like beading and skin sewing. Down in Ohio, we don't need a lot of the same kind of clothing you need in Alaska because it's 70 below up there and 12 feet of snow and you know in comparison to here you don't need that down here, so… But I still do it just to keep it, cause that's like my grandma. And I think the closest thing that, not closest, but beading is- yeah it's- you can do that any part of the world but the skin sewing is different. That's what it means to be Indian.

Commentary and Response

Spending time at NAICCO talking with and getting to know Native Americans paired with conducting this interview gave me a unique view into many of the subjects discussed in class. Hearing about my interviewee's childhood experience and displacement from her community serves as a perfect example of how Native people were not taken into consideration and knowingly devastated in the name of economic advancement and societal development from the perspectives of colonial powers and the United States. In forming a concept of Indian Identity, R used many cultural practices to sum up what it means to be Indian to her. She also discussed how in the face of oppression much of her culture was difficult to hold on to and express. The loss of language due to the state's request and parental obligation to help their children speak better English to fit in shows how cultural practices began to shift.

The fact that R is dedicated to holding on to the koyukon Athabaskan language and teaching it along with other cultural practices to her children and grandchildren emphasizes the importance of the past among Native people. Due to the culture shock, R felt lost and was lonely during her first few years in an urban area. Meeting other Native Americans having a community in which a similar perspective and similar cultural practices could take place, helped R regain her sense of identity. Teaching the history of their people to descendants through linguistic and craft means, R is helping to create a Native community within an urban environment.

It is exciting to see this enthusiasm for Natives with different backgrounds coming together in the face of the difficulties of urbanization. By preserving cultural teachings and practices of the past, the Native community can build up and strengthen their sense of identity. This may seem like they are conforming to the

pan-Indian mash constructed by white oppressors, but R acknowledges and reconciles this shift: “I don’t think we could help it, it’s just a change. It’s just life, like for anybody in the world that goes through from comparing your life from now to the 18, early 1900s, there’s a big change, yeah?” This was a powerful statement that places the importance on the past and remembrance rather than the exact facets of what is done in the contemporary world. By expounding cultural and spiritual practices from the past and exhibiting them in the modern era can help Native Americans reclaim their sense of identity after the negative effects of urbanization.